



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949  
[childrenslawcenter.org](http://childrenslawcenter.org)

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee of the Whole  
March 17, 2016

Public Hearing:  
Bill 21-620, *Homeward DC Omnibus Approval of Facilities Plan for Short-term Housing for  
Persons Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2016*

Judith Sandalow  
Executive Director  
Children's Law Center

## Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children's Law Center<sup>1</sup> and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 8 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. Children's Law Center works with an increasing number of children living in unstable situations on the verge of homelessness, children struggling with homelessness, and children whose health, and particularly their asthma, is compromised by the unhealthy living conditions of the DC General Shelter.

I am testifying today regarding the *Homeward DC Omnibus Approval of Facilities Plan for Short-term Housing for Persons Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2016*, the latest step in the Administration's on-going work to close the DC General Shelter. The bill asks the Council to approve the Administration's current plan to replace the DC General Shelter facility with six new shelters spread across Wards 3 through 8 – shelters which will be smaller, more thoughtfully designed, and, we expect, more carefully integrated into surrounding communities than the options we currently offer to homeless families.<sup>2</sup> I fully support the Mayor's goal of shuttering DC General forever –

we cannot afford to continue to have children live in a crumbling, chaotic facility that is a constant source of health problems and trauma for its youngest residents. The Mayor has put forward a plan that, I believe, will achieve this goal, and for this reason, I urge the Council to support it.

No plan is perfect, and I know that you and your colleagues have likely heard a number of criticisms of this plan in the few weeks since it was presented to you. I urge the Council to be solution-oriented: This plan is the best opportunity we have to end the inexcusable practice of sending children to live at DC General. If we allow the plan to fail – by delaying it, by derailing it, or by removing enough elements from it that it simply falls apart – it is the District’s homeless children who will pay the price for our inability to work together. To keep this plan moving forward, the Administration has been clear that it needs the Council’s support, and I urge the Council to provide it, while working with the community and the Administration to ensure:

- Concerns related to the health and welfare of children in these new shelters are thoroughly addressed by a clear and transparent stakeholder engagement process that extends through the design, planning, and construction phases of the plan.
- Neighbors are also actively engaged at all phases of the process to ensure that the new shelters meet the needs of residents in the shelter and their neighbors.

### **Why The Mayor’s Plan is the Best Way Forward**

In the weeks since the Mayor announced the proposed locations of the six DC General Shelter replacement facilities, a series of vigorous debates have unfolded across

the city, as many have closely scrutinized several aspects of the Mayor's plan. While a great deal of attention has been directed toward the effects (real or imagined) of these proposed shelters on surrounding communities, we cannot lose sight of a simple and unacceptable fact: Each day, hundreds of children continue to live at DC General, a facility that aggravates their already-existing trauma and, in many cases, is harmful to their health. It is these children – District children – who we must put first. Our current, grossly inadequate approach to serving them cannot be allowed to continue.

In previous hearings, I have testified to the conditions of DC General.<sup>3</sup> The facility is plagued by rodent and other pest infestations, intermittent hot water, and unsafe housing conditions, which have only gotten worse as the facility has continued to fall apart. These conditions trigger medical problems in the children who live there, especially asthma. Through our medical-legal partnerships with Children's National Health System and Unity Health Care, we regularly receive referrals from pediatricians and calls to our legal helpline regarding children at DC General, as they live with medical problems that their families struggle to manage but which cannot be fully remedied as long as they remain in a facility that is making them sick.

Adding to these children's struggles is that many arrive at DC General having already experienced significant challenges. Homeless children go hungry twice as often as other children,<sup>4</sup> and, without even specifically accounting for the particular inadequacies of a poorly-constructed shelter, are sick four times more often.<sup>5</sup> Children

with these backgrounds are in need of a range of supports and spaces where they can have healthy interactions with peers. Because it was never intended to be a homeless shelter, DC General is not well-designed to provide these supports.

The Mayor's plan has the potential to remedy many of the problems of the current DC General facility. New shelters can be built and maintained to avoid aggravating children's health problems, can be designed with space to house the specific services that children and families need, and, because they are smaller in size, should be easier to maintain and manage than DC General ever has been. Additionally, the plan provides us with an opportunity to properly integrate families in shelter into surrounding communities, which will cut down on the isolation that these children and their families often feel when they are warehoused in DC General or hotels. Simply put, the Mayor's plan offers us a feasible way of addressing many of DC General's greatest weaknesses within a timeframe that allows us to close DC General permanently by September 2018. The alternative is the status quo, with children continuing to languish at the current facility year after year.

### **Stakeholder Concerns and How to Address Them**

My support for the Mayor's overall plan does not eliminate the need for oversight or for important concerns to be addressed. For example, when neighbors raise concerns with regard to children's health, we should take them seriously, since protecting children's health and well-being is a key objective in closing DC General.

The most serious concerns that we have heard so far are around the Mayor's proposed site for the Ward 5 facility and whether the adjacent bus depot might result in children placed at the Ward 5 shelter being exposed to unsafe levels of pollution. Others have pointed out that currently there is limited access to the District's public transportation system and to grocery stores.

These concerns can and should be addressed in a solution-oriented way. The Department of Health and the Department of Energy and Environment can conduct an air quality study (or share results if one has already been conducted) and take any steps necessary to mitigate health risks, including moving the bus depot. Similarly, shuttles could be used to address concerns regarding lack of public transportation options and lack of access to grocery stores. A shelter advisory committee, comprised of shelter residents, neighbors and advocates, could play a critical role in ensuring that these type of concerns are addressed for the Ward 5 site and any other sites where similar concerns have been raised.

It is my sincerest hope that, with a plan for community input in place, we can proceed with the Administration's plan to close DC General and, at the same time, protect the needs of the very children who this plan is clearly intended to serve. I urge the Council to approve the Administration's plan while using this hearing to encourage the Administration to commit to a process of community engagement moving forward.

## Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering any questions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 8 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

<sup>2</sup> Section (2)(c) of the bill exempts [the contracts](#) from Section 202(c) of the *District of Columbia Procurement Practices Reform Act of 2010*. I do not believe that review of these contracts should be exempt. Since our understanding from the Administration is that the bill will be amended to remove this exemption, I will not be discussing it in my testimony today.

<sup>3</sup> *Safety Procedures at DC General Family Shelter: Hearing before the Committee on Health and Human Services, DC Council*, pp. 5-6 (March 27, 2014) (Testimony of Judith Sandalow).

<sup>4</sup> Bassuk, Ellen & Friedman, Steven. *Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children*. National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2005), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> National Center on Family Homelessness. *The Characteristics and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness* (factsheet) (December, 2011), p. 4. <http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/306.pdf>